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# **'Don't you trust me?': teenagers challenging friendship on Snapchat**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the use of Snapchat among teenagers in France, examining how its unique features shape social dynamics and trust among young users. The research was conducted between 2016 and 2018 in four middle schools located in Parisian suburbs, and included 150 interviews with pupils aged 10 to 17, a questionnaire with 236 responses, and netnography of 100 Snapchat profiles. Additionally, education professionals and the French Snapchat CEO were interviewed. The findings reveal that Snapchat is used by teenagers to test the trust boundaries of their peers, resulting in significant changes to friendship dynamics. This is illustrated through the use of snap streaks, where teenagers ask friends for their passwords to maintain the streaks. Refusal to share passwords can lead to suspicion and mistrust, creating an environment of secrecy and betrayal. Despite the ephemeral nature of snaps, teenagers find ways to save them, leading to the perpetuation of rumors and misrepresentation of facts. The study highlights how abusive trust on Snapchat can result in a loss of reputation and negative consequences for users. Through an analysis of cases of betrayal and reputation shifts, this paper illustrates how private sharing on Snapchat creates an ambivalent trust relationship within teenage friendships.

**Keywords :** Trust ; Snapchat ; Friendship ; Reputation ; Youth

## **1. Introduction**

The internet has become an integral part of our lives, creating a virtual extension of the real world where people interact and experience real-life consequences. However, online communication is fundamentally different from face-to-face interactions, as digital interfaces can modify the nature of our relationships. John Suler, a renowned cyber psychologist, demonstrated that online chatting can produce a disinhibition effect, leading to both confidences and malevolence (2004). Trust is essential to any friendship, as it serves as the main tie in this unconstrained relationship (Bidart, 1997). With the emergence of social media, friendship has evolved to grow and be maintained online, particularly among the Z generation, the new digital native generation (Palfrey & Grasser, 2008). In contrast to the Y generation's online experience in the early 2000s, where teenagers required a computer to access the internet and online interactions were limited by time and space, the Z generation, born after 2000, is introduced to a world of blurred spatiotemporal borders through smartphones. Messages can arrive at any time, from anyone, and they can chat with people they met offline, online, or simultaneously on and offline, reconfiguring relationships and interactions. In France, Snapchat has become the preferred mode of communication for teenagers as it aims to create an interaction similar to face-to-face conversations by making the device and social network disappear. Despite this minimalistic approach, the question remains: does Snapchat influence the French Z generation's conception and experience of friendship? On Snapchat, friendship is defined by the regularity, reciprocity, and intensity of exchanges. Although friendship is a privileged relationship, in an unlimited co-presence, teenagers distinguish their true friends through evidence of trustworthiness, sharing intimacies and secrets. However, sending such signs of reliability through a device renders them vulnerable to virality, prompting teenagers to take precautions to protect their reputation in the event of betrayal.

## **2. A (n)ethnographical method**

Between 2016 and 2018, I conducted a two-year research study that took place in four secondary schools located in Paris, which catered to students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The schools were categorized based on their geographical locations and the demographic makeup of their student body. School A was situated in the city center and enrolled mostly students from higher social classes, while school B was located in a gentrified suburb where the majority of pupils were from lower classes. School C was a suburban area enrolling students from both higher and lower social classes, with some coming from nearby ghettos. Lastly, school D was situated in an inner-city ghetto, with pupils only from lower social classes and recent migration.

During the study, I observed the behavior of students in various settings, including the schoolyard, hallways, classrooms, and interactions with their peers, supervisors, teachers, nurses, and administrators. The students

affectionately referred to me as ‘Miss Interview’, and I conducted around 150 interviews with students aged 10 to 17. The interviews focused on the students' experiences with friendship, reputation both online and offline, rumors, and conflicts they encountered. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' online behavior, I followed around 100 of them on both Instagram and Snapchat.

In addition to conducting interviews and following students on social media, I attended bullying and cyberbullying prevention sessions organized by teachers, nurses, and police officers. I also interviewed school administrators, teachers, nurses, police officers, and the CEO of Snap Inc.'s French subsidiary to gather their perspectives on the topic. To augment the research data further, I shared a Google Form on each of the four schools' websites, which received voluntary responses from approximately 15% of the student body.

**Table 1 Characteristic of questionnaire respondents (n=236)**

	Number	Frequency
<i>School grade</i>		
6 <sup>e</sup> (11-12-year-old)	36	15,3%
5 <sup>e</sup> (12-13-year-old)	75	31,8%
4 <sup>e</sup> (13-14-year-old)	60	25,4%
3 <sup>e</sup> (14-15-year-old)	65	27,5%
<i>School</i>		
A	35	14,8%
B	111	47%
C	52	22%
D	38	16,1%
<i>Sex</i>		
Girl	150	64%
Boy	86	36%

### 3. Being friends on Snapchat

In the context of French teenage social media usage, it is evident that multiple platforms serve specific purposes for this demographic. Facebook, for instance, is primarily utilized as a means to remain connected with family members. Conversely, Instagram is predominantly viewed as a virtual business card to showcase meticulously selected and edited photographs. Amongst surveyed French teenagers, Snapchat emerges as the dominant messaging platform, with a significant proportion of respondents indicating its use. Indeed, an overwhelming majority (69.2%) of those surveyed reported having a Snapchat account, highlighting its immense popularity. Furthermore, over half (58.6%) of the respondents identified Snapchat as their favored social media platform, followed by Instagram at 20.2%.

**Table 2 Teenagers' favorite social media (n=203)**

	Number	Frequency
Facebook	8	3.9%
Instagram	41	20.2%
Snapchat	119	58.6%
Twitter	7	3.4%
WhatsApp	28	13.8%

Snap Inc., the company behind Snapchat, does not classify its product as a traditional social network, as it differs from popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in several key ways. Most notably, Snapchat is unique in the temporary nature of its messages, which are primarily ephemeral, and the prevalence of pictures and videos over text. Upon opening the app, users are immediately directed to the camera, and the quick capture of visual content is encouraged. The app also features playful filters that mock the discomfort of imperfect appearances and disinhibit users from taking selfies.

The use of Snapchat as a communication tool disrupts traditional conceptions of relatively polished images used to supply collective memory, as the ephemeral nature of the images and messages create a friendly and

informal conversational temporality, or what Labourdette (2016) describes as 'locutions'. In this sense, Snapchat recreates face-to-face orality conditions for its users beyond the physical distance separating them. Furthermore, the app can be described as a 'ghost network' (Déage, 2018) due to the ephemeral sharing of messages that disappear upon viewing and the invisible communities formed, where contact information such as community, nicknames, numbers, relations, and reactions remain unknown.

The ephemeral and fleeting nature of Snapchat may belie a more nuanced conception of friendship that is configured by the app's unique features. Indeed, the app's emphasis on instantaneity and ephemerality suggests a type of friendship that prioritizes frequent, reciprocal, and intense exchanges between two individuals. These interactions are time-limited, occurring within the present moment and disappearing quickly thereafter. Despite this, Snapchat remains a crucial social media tool among French teenagers, with a substantial majority of 69.2% reporting an account and 58.6% citing it as their preferred platform. This attests to the app's significant role in shaping the social lives and relationships of this demographic.

### **3.1 Intimate connections**

Snapchat's unique design distinguishes it from most other social media platforms, as it functions as a close friends' network, requiring users to provide specific information, such as a phone number or a snapcode screen, to add contacts. While concerns about cyberbullying have received considerable attention in public debate and educational programs, French teenagers are more preoccupied with privacy issues on social media (Génération Numérique, 2018). They tend to avoid leaving any traces of their online activities that could be discovered by others, and Snapchat's features enable them to share with peers while avoiding the possibility of unwanted attention from predators. They also trust their peers and believe that the app's features limit the potential dissemination of their information, as they can restrict their audience and receive notifications when their content is received, opened, replayed, or captured.

Adolescence is a critical period of transition from parental to self-identity, where young people become progressively more independent (Galland, 1991). Social media provides them with an opportunity to connect with their peers and express their identity, away from the surveillance of parents and teachers (Metton, 2004). Similar to the Y generation's use of blogs (Fluckiger, 2006, p.113), teenagers use the internet to experiment and absorb youth culture norms, which may sometimes conflict with school or parental rules. They tend to avoid Facebook and its adult-dominated presence, fearing predators, parental and teacher surveillance, and potential sanctions.

Snapchat, on the other hand, is particularly popular among teenagers, with 71% of people under 25 reportedly using the platform in 2017 (Coëffe, 2018). The app creates a strong generational homogeneity, as few parents or teachers have a Snapchat account due to its non-intuitive and childish design. The CEO of Snap Inc.'s French subsidiary suggests that the company deliberately developed a hidden design to create an initiated user network. Connecting to Snapchat is thus considered a rite of passage into adolescence, providing teenagers with the means to integrate into their peers' groups.

It is true that Snapchat is designed to be unreadable. Originally, this non-readability was intended to initiate real-life conversations. For example, one person might say, 'Oh, you're not on Snapchat? Well, let me show you.' This would start a discussion, initiating offline virality. In fact, there are no online features such as views, shares, comments or likes on Snapchat. The app's cryptic style was initially seen by teenagers as something that was against adults. Secondly, it was present in people's top-of-mind, and the spread of the application was always organized between insiders and outsiders. 'Let me show you how the app works, otherwise, you won't be able to do it yourself', creating a status for the one who knows and then for the one who did not know and who becomes the one who knows. (CEO of Snap Inc.'s French subsidiary, April 2018)

### **3.2 Rewarded shares**

The flashy and entertaining interface of Snapchat reminds users of video games. User interactions are rewarded with scores and trophies, which are public indicators of user activity. However, the score does not reflect the amount of snaps sent and received. Instead, the score promotes interaction and encourages the use of various features. For example, the score rewards reactivity, as more points are given when users respond to messages immediately. Despite this, the calculation of the score remains unclear to most users.

Behavioral psychology suggests that random rewards may reinforce behavior (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). Thus, the random rewards in Snapchat may stimulate users' desire to share on the app.

Snapchat is well-known for its stories, pictures, and short videos that are publicly accessible for 24 hours. However, private chats are where most users' activities are concentrated. Among teenagers using Snapchat, 30.4% never publish stories, and only 17% publish every day (n=171). The prioritization of interpersonal communication over public self-display allows users to assume different social roles. Facebook and Instagram pages are front-stage interactions, where individuals present an artificially unified self (Goffman, 2006[1959]). However, people known from different spheres may have different or even contradictory versions of the self. In this sense, a wider network requires stronger self-censorship. In contrast, Snapchat's private and restricted network may disinhibit teenagers for sharing content. They can experiment with an online self closer to their offline social selves, without assuming a multi-normative social control. Communication on Snapchat is presented as a fun and light-hearted activity. The French CEO of Snapchat has stated that 'Snapchat is designed to be ridiculous because we know it does not matter,' as users share with close friends. Lenses, which are augmented reality masks, are used to reduce users' embarrassment in showing themselves. According to the CEO, these lenses are meant to cultivate a 'sane self-esteem' by encouraging users to laugh instead of falsely embellishing their lives. Thus, the platform stands for an internet derision culture (Dagnaud, 2013, p. 91-119).

### 3.3 Intensified co-presences

The aim of Snapchat is to facilitate face-to-face connections despite physical distance, with the ultimate goal of promoting the common good. (The CEO of Snap Inc.'s French subsidiary, April 2018)

Snapchat's purported goal is to replicate the intimacy of face-to-face relationships, even over long distances. This mission appears to be a noble one, driven by a desire to serve the common good. Nevertheless, the platform's evaluative mechanisms may promote a narrow conception of relationships. As previously noted, the interface rewards prompt responses with scores, causing messages to be treated as urgent matters. This requirement not only enables social control but also prioritizes online communication over offline activity. As most snaps vanish quickly, users must pay full attention to them, effectively isolating themselves from the surrounding world. Although the platform's temporal scope extends several years back, with features such as saving messages and content, ephemeral communication remains the norm.

In this evanescent configuration, relationships must be continuously maintained. The snap streak feature encourages daily sharing, with a flame emoji appearing next to conversations after several days of uninterrupted communication. The app counts the number of days that communication has continued and displays it next to the symbol. When nearly 24 hours have elapsed since the last message, a sandglass icon appears, warning that time is running out before the flame goes out. This feature defines the value of a relationship based on interaction frequency and reciprocity.

In Parisian middle schools, 60.1% of teenagers who use Snapchat have a flame with their friends, and 36.5% try to achieve the highest possible snap streak (n=170). Sometimes, they ask in their story if someone wants to have a flame with them. In this rush to share, they may be less cautious about the content they share, opting to share any mundane event just to keep in touch. Phatic conversations (Licoppe, 2002; Velten, Arif, & Moehring, 2017, p. 238) consisting of spontaneous, low-quality, and hastily edited 'fast food' images (Verstraete, 2016, p. 113) create a continuous co-presence. These informal, suggestive, and elliptical videos (*ibid*, p. 109) provide a realistic chronicle of friends' experiences, creating a sense of immersion. Through voices, settings, facial expressions, and imagery, classmates can see and be seen in each other's lives outside of school, even if they are not yet permitted to go out together.

However, teenagers often subvert this sharing imperative by sending black screens or flame emojis without any other content. When they have flames with many people, they usually create a list of recipients for these contentless snaps. In this case, daily sharing becomes a means to earn flames rather than maintaining friendships.

## 4. Friendship, trust and reputation

### 4.1 Discrepancies between snapchat and teenagers' friendship conception

Although Snapchat refers to contacts as 'friends' and sharing with them adds value to conversation, teenagers are able to distinguish between permanent co-presence and friendship. As explained by Clair Bidart (2002, 2010), adolescence is a period in life when informal co-presence is highly developed. Joining middle school, which is typically larger than elementary school, and connecting to social media (81.1% of teenagers receive a smartphone before or at 12 years old) can drastically increase relational options.

Paradoxically, while Snapchat is designed for people who already know each other in real life, it often serves as the first digital meeting place for young people. They frequently use their Snapchat stories to share their friends' Snapcodes or nicknames, encouraging their community to add them. Therefore, Snapchat is not necessarily considered a close friend social media platform by teenagers.

**Table 3** Social media where teenagers encounter most new people (n=226)

	Number	Frequency
None	114	50.4%
Facebook	7	3.1%
Instagram	35	15.5%
Snapchat	62	27.4%
Twitter	4	1.8%
WhatsApp	4	1.8%

Teenagers often interact with new people both online and offline, but it does not necessarily imply that these individuals are considered as friends. Their socialization is constrained by the educational institution, which defines class groups, timetables, obligations, and sanctions, among other factors. According to young people, trust is the main criterion for distinguishing between friends and other types of relationships. Even for them, friendship is considered an exceptional bond. On average, teenagers report that they only have 4.8 schoolmates whom they trust (see Table 4).

**Table 4** Schoolmates teenagers are trusting (n=219)

	Number	Frequency
Aucun	17	7,2 %
1 schoolmate	21	8,9 %
2 schoolmates	35	14,8 %
3 schoolmates	29	12,3 %
4 schoolmates	44	18,6 %
From 5 to 9 schoolmates	36	15,3 %
10 schoolmates and more	37	15,7 %

The concept of trust is multifaceted and can be further elucidated. Trust is not an automatic, optimal, or complete gift in practice. Individuals may consider someone reliable without trusting them, accept to interact with someone they deem untrustworthy, or trust someone for one aspect but not another. However, it is possible to articulate values and expectations that should be met by individuals we trust.

In the case of teenagers, sincerity (27.5%), a sense of humor (22.5%), and respect (17.8%) are the key qualities that facilitate the formation of friendships. Expectations for friendship vary by gender, with boys valuing friends who support them during difficult times (29.3%), those who are fun (29.3%), or those who share similar interests (12.2%). Girls also prioritize support (21.3%) but also value friends who are always there for them (20%) and with whom they can be their authentic selves (18%). Masculine friendship is characterized by entertainment, while feminine friendship is primarily focused on intimacy (see Table 5). As such, the definition of friendship proposed by Snapchat is not prevalent among teenagers: only 15.1% of teenagers consider permanence to be the most important criterion in distinguishing friends from acquaintances, while only 2.6% believe that duration is the most significant factor.

**Table 5.** True friend main characteristic according to gender (n=232)

	True love	Support in difficult times	Confidant	Always there for you	Long-standing acquaintance	Fun	Authenticity	Shared values	Shared interests	Total
Girl	8,0%	21,3%	7,3%	20,0%	0,0%	14,0%	18,0%	1,2%	6,0%	100%
Boy	3,7%	29,3 %	4,9%	6,1%	7,3%	29,3%	6,1%	5,3%	12,2%	100%
total	6,5 %	23,7 %	6,5%	15,1 %	2,6 %	19,4%	13,8 %	3,9 %	8,1%	100%

$\chi^2$  : 35,242, ddl = 18, p-value = 0,008812

## 4.2 Numerical trust as friendship bound

During the transitional phase from childhood to adolescence, behavioral norms undergo rapid changes, but students integrate them at varying rates. It is common for former friends to stop communicating due to perceived changes in one another, resulting in 39.4% of students feeling abandoned by a friend. Middle school marks a period where ties between adults and children become increasingly undone. As parents grant their children more independence, and with the multiplicity of teachers, pupils begin to distance themselves from adult authority. In this process of automation, youth culture and language, which tend to confront adult norms, gain prominence. Adolescents assert themselves within their peer groups through their music, movies, clothing, language, and sense of humor, influenced by popular culture and transgressive behaviors. However, exaggerating one's belonging to this youth culture can sometimes threaten friendships. Those who abandon their initial group to stand out in supposed popular circles may be denigrated. Leila and Lina, two 13-year-old girls from School, recounted how their friend had changed.

Leila: Actually, the way she changed is not necessarily for the worse. Some people change for the worse, but that's not the case here. Before, she used to speak in a gentle manner. But now, she speaks in a way that surprises us. She's acting like a diva [*Elle fait sa meuf*]. It's hard to explain, but we use the phrase 'elle fait sa meuf' to describe this behavior.

Interviewer: What do you mean exactly?

Leila: She acts as if she's superior to others.

Lina: Yes, that's right. Often, when she becomes friends with someone new, she changes her behavior, her thoughts, her clothing style, and even her way of speaking. For instance, someone told her about something, and she responded by saying 'yes, I like it'. But when another girl told her that the same thing sucks, she changed her opinion and agreed with her.

In situations of relational instability, there are two ways to reduce uncertainty: 1) through trust, where an individual suspends their search for information and believes in the reliability of the other person to avoid betrayal, and 2) through mistrust, where an individual seeks guarantees of reliability to protect themselves from betrayal. Isabelle Clair (2008, p. 88-89) observed that in youth communities, the constant threat of rumors and reputational damage creates an atmosphere of mistrust. Adolescents often believe that adults are incapable of securing their peer relationships, resulting in them placing their trust in very few people, and when they do, it tends to be unconditional.

As a manifestation of this trust, teenagers often give their best friends their Snapchat passwords so that they can keep an eye on their flame' and receive their friend's password in exchange. This exchange of passwords serves to reinforce the exceptional nature of their friendship and their confidence that it will endure.

### 4.3 Reputation as a guarantee

In the context of Snapchat, conversations may be considered intimate, yet not entirely confidential. Adolescents are aware that the content they share could potentially be exposed. Despite their knowledge of Snapchat's features, including views and captures, they possess alternative techniques (such as the use of an external camera or specific apps, and Wi-Fi disconnection) to save content surreptitiously. They are also cognizant of the fact that password sharing among peers is commonplace, and that multiple users may access the same account, potentially leading to identity theft. Unlike Google, Snapchat does not immediately notify users when someone logs in from another device; this feature must be enabled by the user, which is a rarity among teenagers.

Friendship holds paramount importance as a source of social and emotional support for teenagers. On the one hand, shared activities and co-presence facilitate information exchange among peers. On the other hand, students are constrained in the schoolyard as they feel the control and scrutiny of their peers whom they do not fully trust. As a result, adolescents seek refuge in Snapchat to share confidential information with their most trusted friends. Despite its significance, friendships at this stage of life are vulnerable and delicate. To safeguard against potential deception, teenagers tend to collect a 'dossier' of compromising information that they could use as leverage to disseminate rumors if a former friend were to threaten them. Fear and revenge can create negative reputations that result in exclusion from the peer group. In the digital age, apps make it effortless to save and disseminate content, while possessing someone's password enables teenagers to access and share compromising information with their entire community. According to Imen, a 14-year-old student at School C, streaks on Snapchat tend to bolster the spread of rumors.

Imen: There was a girl, it's been a long time, maybe two years ago, her boyfriend sent her a message on Snapchat saying: Aida, I want to have sex with you. They were both in this school and dating at that time. She didn't say yes or no. I didn't say anything either. But this year, the rumor surfaced again! She's now in 3e. Her ex-boyfriend told a group of guys, who then spread it to everyone. I think he got mad when they broke up.

Interviewer: Students often mention using a dossier to protect themselves.

Imen: Yes, that's how it works here. If I'm mad at you, I threaten to expose your dossier in front of everyone. In Aida's case, the boy didn't like her and said, 'Shut up, stop talking, or else I'll reveal your dossier.' It's like an atomic bomb, and everyone will know about it. They'll be shocked and won't talk to you. That's how we do it. If you're angry at someone, you can use their dossier against them.

In the realm of social media, teenagers exhibit a sense of apprehension towards unfamiliar adults. This cautiousness is further exemplified by the actions of the French CEO of Snapchat, who prohibits his 14-year-old son from creating a profile on the application due to the potential threat posed by predators. However, studies have demonstrated that a significant proportion of cyberbullying incidents are perpetrated by individuals known to the victim within the school environment (Blaya, 2016, p. 59). Such aggression may be instigated by factors such as love, or in the context of betrayal among friends.

## 5. Conclusion

Snapchat, while purporting to recreate face-to-face interaction online, is not a neutral interface. Among its features, the snap streak stands out as having a strong influence on teenagers' interactions. Through symbolic rewards, it promotes an imperative of permanent and intensive co-presence between 'friends'. Teenagers are keen on this kind of reward and many of them strive to obtain it as frequently as possible. However, they also find ways to circumvent the imperative of sharing by sending contentless snaps. Although Snapchat was designed for close friends, it has become the primary meeting place for Parisian teenagers, who, at this stage of their lives, experience relational autonomy that is both new and unstable. Consequently, they often live in a mistrusting atmosphere, with many acquaintances but few trusted friends (an average of 4.8). Snap streaks are a pretext for them to test the reliability of their friends and exchange passwords to avoid losing their symbolic flames. They are aware that such actions increase the risk of deception and, therefore, protect themselves by amassing information they can use to threaten their friends if they feel their own reputation is endangered.



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